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THE MAKING OF A MODERN MINNESINGER¹

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The minnesingers of old were naturally endowed artists, whose greatest joy was simple, free self-expression. They combined in their art of story-telling the arts of the dramatist and the actor, of the teacher and the historian. The minnesinger, in his simple fashion, carried to the people what today is provided by the theater, the lecture, the picture-theater, and the school. In this day of specialization the story-teller finds his field restricted.

There are many kinds of modern-day story-tellers, impelled by various motives. For the purpose of this discussion I shall divide them into two main groups—the selfish and the altruistic, though of course the motives of each are always somewhat mixed.

There is a mischievous type of people who would reap benefits without paying a legitimate price. Among these I must place the commercially minded, who would perform in public for the sake of the publicity and the financial return. This type is often stimulated to activity by moving-picture-theater managers, who seek to cater to the growing interest in the children's story-hour. In order to add to the popularity of their places of amusement they would, if possible, adopt the methods resorted to by the kindergartens and the public libraries for educational purposes. I have been asked to furnish story-tellers for moving-picture-theater managers, who would capitalize the element of personal vanity in order to get this service for nothing.

There are story-tellers who would entertain for the sake of the applause, with little thought of the effect of their entertainment upon the audience.

Then there are the sentimentalists—people who have no love for the children, for sick people, for old people, nor for art or

¹Read before the Chicago Branch of the National Story-Tellers' League, March 4, 1916.

literature. But they have much leisure and few satisfactory avenues for self-expression. They must do something to gratify their desire for an outlet; so they tell stories. To such as these story-telling is a self-indulgence, not an art.

The altruistic story-tellers are the mothers, the librarians, the teachers, and the social workers, who at the same time are serious students. It is the privilege of these and of the members of the Story-Tellers' League to offset, so far as possible, the activities of the superficial story-tellers such as I have described, by developing in the community a realization of what story-telling may become in the hands of its scholarly and altruistic friends.

It is not only in the cities but throughout the entire country that both children and young people are in need of uplifting recreation. Every home needs a story-teller—an intelligent, sympathetic, well-informed story-teller—to knit together the interests of the older and the younger children and those of the parents and children. I believe I have found one way to meet this need.

Our young people of high-school age are all but bursting with pent-up emotion demanding expression. Students of this age have an imperative need to express their feelings. Through story-telling in the home, the club, the school, and the Sunday school they may be given an unparalleled opportunity for self-expression of a kind in which they may safely indulge.

It is the aim of the oral-expression department of the Hyde Park High School to improve the speech and bearing of the young people who come within its sphere of influence. To accomplish this is a more serious problem than it would appear at first to be.

Oral expression cannot be taught as an informational subject. It cannot be learned from textbooks. It is rather inspirational. Improvement in speech habits demands, first of all, an impelling motive sufficiently powerful to sustain one through long months of patient self-criticism and conscious constructive effort after the necessary information has been acquired.

We see and read of the waywardness, rudeness, and general lack of kindliness on the part of our American young people in their home life. It seems not to be so generally known—at least we do

not sufficiently take into account the fact—that a large proportion of our more thoughtful young people are suffering from acute self-consciousness, as a result of thoughtless teasing, joking, and criticism which they encounter in the home.

The mother of a clever little girl said to me one day, “I understand that my son has registered in one of your classes for oral expression. I cannot imagine why he did it, because he has no dramatic talent at all. His sister reads very well, but we always think it a joke when brother tries to read.” Is it surprising that this lad was self-conscious? We criticized him—the class and I—but always with the stated idea of helping him, and always with constructive suggestions as to how he might overcome his faults. In two semesters he became a very good reader, for, once freed from the fear of ridicule, he gave expression to a dramatic appreciation that was a surprise to everyone.

A little girl who had been spontaneous and enthusiastic suddenly developed an unreasonable shyness and a reluctance to tell her stories. She confessed that her mother had recently told her that she “talked too much with her face”; that as a little girl her manner had been satisfactory, but that now she must keep her face “more blank,” to use her own words. To the daughter this meant that she must smooth out all the lines of expression in her naturally responsive face.

Another pupil compressed her lips primly over her teeth. I told her that all she needed to make her story-telling interesting was to relax her lips so that we might understand her better. After the class was dismissed she told me that when she was a baby her bones had been soft, and that in later years her teeth had been so defective that she had done her best to hide them, even from her family, who had unwittingly added to her suffering by teasing her because her teeth were small. I told her to banish from her mind the thought that there was anything unusual in their appearance. It was a great relief to her to be told that she was not miserably disfigured.

After making allowance for an occasional case of abnormal self-pity, I am certain that much of the self-conscious misery of our young people could be avoided if grown people were more

considerate in refraining from criticizing or even mentioning unavoidable personal peculiarities.

It must be admitted, however, that it is not always in the home alone that the young people are hampered in the development of genuine and natural self-expression. Not seldom will the teacher herself be found contributing, all unconsciously, perhaps, to this lamentable condition. Pupils often shudder as they tell me of the sharpness and unforgiving spirit of this teacher, and the sarcastic speech of that one. I am sure both home and school are at times at fault. If the teacher is artificial, or unsympathetic, or lacking in spontaneity, how can it be expected that the young, untrained mind can be brought to cultivate and develop qualities which, although perhaps inherent, yet need sympathetic stimulation to bring them to fruition? That true sympathy, capable of adapting itself to meet the exigencies of each case, can work wonders in the plastic young material can be shown, I trust, by a few examples drawn from life. The desperate states of mind which these young performers pass through are merely phases of a temporary stress which tact can remove. One boy, in his search for an elusive word to express just what he had in mind, would frequently unbutton his coat in order that he might breathe more freely. Then he would unbutton his vest, and thrust his hands vigorously into his pockets, and search the faces of his audience for the word that would not come. When this search was finally rewarded (as it always was, if we were patient), he would quietly button up and proceed with his story.

Another student, who was practicing for a public performance by telling her story to the class, astonished me by introducing a number of gestures. I had never had any occasion to speak of gestures, having waited, rather, for just such an unconscious effort, born of the intensity of the moment, before bringing up the subject for discussion. This pupil had been entirely unconscious of her effort at making gestures, and was very much astonished when I told her what she had done.

A boy who was making his first appearance before the class blushed furiously, and then turned so white and looked so distressed, I really feared he was ill. He made a desperate effort to begin his

story; but his tongue was paralyzed, and finally with a look of unutterable relief he muttered, "I give it up," and dropped into the nearest seat. After class I talked with him, making light of his fiasco, and advised that he prepare a short story for the next time. Soon after this he came to class, saying that he had a story prepared, and asked that I be sure to call on him. I did so, and he told an Aesop's Fable. His next effort was a fairy tale, and his third a Greek myth. This increasing ambition was due to his rapidly growing self-confidence. He had won a great spiritual victory, and thereafter was quite at his ease.

From the beginning of his work with me the student is taught that his first concern is the pleasure and profit of his audience. The technique of speech is taught incidentally, as a means of helping the student to accomplish this.

At the Hyde Park High School, classes in story-telling grew out of a desire on the part of the pupils to do something interesting that should be different from the oral work in their English classes. Teachers in the grammar schools use the story-telling method in the teaching of literature and history, and the enthusiasm with which the pupils tell about this work is evidence of its success.

When a pupil leaves the grammar school and enters the high school he finds a radical change in the attitude of the teacher toward her pupils. He is thrown more completely upon his own resources. It is expected that his interest in the tasks assigned and his sense of duty (or the persuasive powers of his parents) will be incentives powerful enough to keep up his courage, no matter how dreary the work may be.

Ask the pupils why they fail in English in the high school, and many will say, "Because the teacher did not make it interesting." What they really want now, to make the work interesting, is not more story-telling by the teacher, but a greater opportunity for self-expression. It is as difficult and unsatisfactory for the average student to express himself naturally in writing as it is for a fish to fly, although some do accomplish it occasionally when they feel frisky. In story-telling I turn the pupils loose, within bounds, and try to give them a chance for spontaneous self-expression. I never assign a lesson, except to say, "Always have a story

ready." I never insist that a pupil *tell* a story. In fact, I refuse to let him do so unless he has found one that he likes and that he thinks will interest the class and that he has prepared and wants to tell.

I do everything I can to stimulate a desire to tell stories to actual audiences not made up of schoolmates. As a result I have had boys telling stories to Sunday-school classes, to Boy Scout Societies, and to children in the home and in the neighborhood.

The girls have been still more ambitious, and have prepared for more formidable efforts. Some of the more mature girls have tried their powers once a week on an audience of from twenty to eighty children, in one of the recreation-park libraries. One Senior girl prepared weekly programs for nine weeks in succession. The only reward she expected for this service was the joy she found in pleasing the children.

Thirty-five girls, in groups of two and three, provided a daily hour for stories and games at a neighborhood recreation center. In this group there were each day from twenty to thirty children under ten years of age. This was a difficult undertaking, because the children were as restless as butterflies, and had to be taught to sit still and listen. The girls learned at once that the only effectual appeal was that of the story. A command to be obeyed was of no avail. When interest in the story did not hold these children, they slipped from their chairs and flitted away without ceremony.

The Sunday schools and Christian Endeavor Societies offer opportunities for some students. Several have visited hospitals and have been enthusiastic over the experience. Girls of seventeen are peculiarly susceptible to the appeal of the helpless sick children. To make the class practice contribute to this work, and to provide suitable material for it, it became necessary to control to some extent the sources from which pupils took their stories.

My classes include pupils of such varied ages and temperaments that we cover the entire field of story literature in our search for material, leaving out only those subjects and authors which, to the children, carry some latent suggestion of school work. After trying various experiments, we are now collecting a library of our

own. Each pupil contributes the price he would pay for his own copy if the entire class bought and used the same book—an experiment that was tried with but little success. Because of the limited character of the material to be found in any one volume, the pupil frequently read the entire book in his search for a story that interested him. Since the majority of the class had done the same thing by the time he told the story that he had selected, he addressed an audience whose interest was sated, and the bored expression of his classmates was enough to dampen the ardor of the most enthusiastic member of the class. The story-telling classes contain more than a hundred pupils each semester. There is now available, for the use of each one of these pupils, who has contributed only the cost of a single volume, a carefully selected library of more than 200 volumes of the best short stories, including folk tales, fairy tales, and myths of many nations, and many volumes of the classic short stories for older people. The members of the story-telling classes are permitted to exchange books as frequently as they like. At first each pupil avails himself of this privilege to the utmost. A careful record is kept of all these exchanges. The final choice of each student is thus indicative of his temperament and the stages of his intellectual development. He thus gets hold of the kind of intellectual food suited to his appetite and powers of assimilation, which is not always the case in his study of literature in the English classes, where much of the material given him as a matter of course is beyond his comprehension.

We discuss the types of stories suited to children of different ages and temperaments, and the question of selecting stories within the understanding of children brought up in various environments.

Some pupils scorn children's stories and use the great masterpieces of short-story fiction. These are more difficult to prepare, because they must be condensed, and in many cases they lose their literary charm in the process. I do everything I can think of to stimulate a search for new stories, and refuse to listen to stories that have only been heard by the pupil, because I believe that much of the value of the work lies in the close reading one must do to find a suitable story and commit its salient features to memory.

The same objection applies to permitting the student to describe events which he has seen depicted in the moving-picture shows. By permitting pupils to choose their own stories their voluntary interest in telling the story is secured, and they read widely in their search for something which really appeals to them. The pupil thus enters the great field of story literature by the portal most attractive to him. By encouraging students to tell stories outside of school, an actual connection is established between their life outside and the thing learned in school.

I had the pleasure of helping a seventeen-year-old boy in one of my classes to provide a series of interesting books for his thirteen-year-old brother to read. The younger brother did not like to read, and did not want to spend his evenings at home. The older brother had burdened himself with a paternal responsibility for his welfare. The last report I had was to the effect that the lad was developing an insatiable appetite for stories of adventure, and had just finished the *second* volume of Charles Reade's long story, *The Cloister and the Hearth*, and was ready for something more.

That the parents are interested in this work is evidenced by the number of fathers and mothers who take the time to select and bring home new and interesting books as rewards and surprises for the ambitious performers. One eighteen-year-old girl came dancing into my room one day, proclaiming with childish joy that her father had brought her three lovely fairy-story books the night before. This father, a busy lawyer, had taken the time to do this because he believed in the wholesomeness of his daughter's enthusiasm for story-telling.

Students of high-school age are old enough to wish to be independent of the authority and advice of older people. I believe that we cannot teach them too soon that if they are to be self-directing they must study their problem with all the intelligence they can bring to bear upon it. While self-analysis may be, and is, a dangerous practice, when unintelligently practiced, we know that the young people *will* assert themselves, and they need to be taught a method of intellectual analysis that will help them to realize that conclusions attained by such a means are, notwithstanding their inexperience, likely to be safer than those based on feelings

alone. I believe that the exercise of trying to stir the interest of an audience, and then saying to one's self, "Now, how did I do it?" or "What should I have done?" is a good thing, and will lead in the long run to a wholesome self-analysis which in its turn will lead to a safe self-direction. The struggle to overcome embarrassment is forgotten when the student can be brought to study his audience while he tells a story. The thought that he must be on the watch for evidence of lack of interest comes to occupy all the attention not required to recall the story, and fear is forgotten.

I try to have students realize that they must win the sympathy of the audience addressed. An audience will at first give its attention expectantly, but the speaker must win and hold its sympathy if the attention is to continue.

I try to have my students appreciate the fact that if they cannot add something of reality, of clearness, vividness, and charm to the story in the telling, they have no legitimate excuse for taking the time of any audience that could save time by reading for itself.

In all this variety of considerations I do not forget, nor do I let the pupils forget, that our primary purpose is to become effective and pleasing in speech, and gracious and well-poised in manner, and that we must be sincere in our desire to give pleasure; otherwise we merely waste the time of our hearers in order to satisfy our own egotism.

My purpose is not to produce parlor entertainers, nor professional story-tellers. Some students, indeed, aspire to be both, and some are led into library and kindergarten work, as the result of the new interest and a realization of its possibilities. My purpose, however, is to free students from self-consciousness through story-telling; to help them develop the poise we Americans are said to lack; and to introduce them to the real happiness that comes from giving pleasure to others. What the children want is the story. Story-tellers need only to be simple and sincere to satisfy the child; but for their own satisfaction they must not be content with a low grade of scholarship, or with a cramped, unsympathetic manner of displaying it. A beautiful story is a work of art, depicting some phase of life and truth, and for its adequate expression there is required an exquisite technique. Nothing

fine can be considered wasted if it is given to a hungry child. Whatever we are—whether stiff and unyielding, soft and sentimental, intellectual or emotional—we must express ourselves. If in doing this we are to do more than merely to express what we wish we were, the change must first come from within. It is futile to hope that a manner of expression can be assumed which will successfully mask our real selves, except for the moment perhaps. We must respect individuality and seek to develop its most effective expression, rather than slavishly to imitate anything or anybody. Much of the needless friction of life would be avoided if we could, with dignity and self-respect, accept ourselves and make the best of it.

I believe it is a valuable thing that the spiritual victory over unreasonable fear and ridicule should be won in youth. Much of the affectation which we see in grown people is due to an unreasonable humility, or perhaps it would be better named if we called it lack of respect for one's own individuality.

My pupils frequently want me to show them how to read, or to show them how to tell a given story. I sometimes do it for them, saying afterwards, "Now you do it." Then I show them how unnatural it is for them to try to express themselves in the light of my understanding. When I ask, "What does it mean to *you*?" "How do *you* feel about it?" they invariably have ideas of their own which I hasten to show them are all they should hope to express unless they wish to be both artificial and insincere.

I try to have my pupils realize that the accumulation of stories suitable for all kinds of occasions is the work of a lifetime, and not of a few days or weeks.

I also try to have them realize a sense of responsibility toward the expectant children who are waiting for them. A failure to keep an appointment can be punished no more severely than by refusing to let the pupil have a second chance to disappoint the children. Our indifference to obligations undertaken, like our superficiality, is only *one* of our national shortcomings. We balk at nothing. Anything that will serve to throw us for a moment into the limelight; anything that will tend to bring us a little public applause, we are ready to undertake at a moment's notice.

And so it is with the story-teller who reads as she runs, who learns her story on the way to its telling.

Many people do not realize what it means to be really prepared for this work. Some, who should know better, seem to be satisfied with the little they know, and have no scholarly interest in the best or the latest books on the subject. The whole truth is not to be found in any one book nor learned from any one teacher. One must be an investigator at heart, with an insatiable desire to know all that is available on the subject, and eager to learn from any and all sources. He must be an intelligent and enthusiastic experimenter, and must find a joy in regarding each new audience addressed as a new opportunity for honest and legitimate experiment.

The world is full of people who must be shown how to do every new thing they undertake, and they look fearfully and disapprovingly at one who refuses to follow in the beaten path. Of all departments of life the educational world is the most hopelessly conservative. To succeed in convincing the pupil that spontaneity is higher and more commendable than conservatism and slavish adherence to convention is in itself a sufficient reward to the conscientious teacher.